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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001439

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW ELECTION LAW DISAPPOINTS CIVIL
SOCIETY, SATISFIES MARCH 14

REF: BEIRUT 1413

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Parliament approved a new electoral law on September 27. The key element was a stipulation that the 2009 parliamentary elections take place in one day, despite concerns about authorities being able to provide security for all polling stations on the same day, as opposed to past practice of voting over four weekends. Also approved was the creation of an electoral supervisory body to monitor candidates' campaigns; campaign finance and media regulations; and use of ID cards for voting. However, a reform strongly advocated by civil society -- the provision that voters use pre-printed, government-issued ballots -- was defeated during the Monday session by MPs from Hizballah, Amal, Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the Future Party. The Parliament also rejected out-of-country voting for 2009, but approved the measure for the 2013 parliamentary elections. Also rejected were allowing officials of the armed forces to vote and lowering the voting age from 21 to 18.

¶2. (C) Civil society contacts, in general, seem disappointed that more measures recommended by the Boutros Commission on electoral reform were not passed. March 14 contacts told us they were generally satisfied with the law. Approval of the law has not changed the prevailing view among observers about which districts will be highly contested, and that the Christian vote will be decisive. End Summary.

NEW LAW IS PARED DOWN FROM PREVIOUS DRAFT VERSIONS

¶3. (U) Parliament adopted a new electoral law on September 29 amending a version of the 1960 electoral law. The Administration and Justice Committee of the parliament had approved a bill a few days before (reftel), leaving some issues for the parliament to decide. Approval of the law marks the last major component of the Doha Agreement, signed

in May 2008, that ended the armed standoff between pro-government and opposition forces.

14. (U) Holding the election on a single day was approved. The bill the Committee approved included a clause that would have allowed an option for elections to be held on two consecutive Sundays as opposed to one day, but this was rejected by the Parliament. Redistricting, agreed on during the Doha meetings, was formally approved in the new law. Restrictions on campaigning in the media and campaign finance restrictions were also passed, in addition to a measure allowing voters to use their national ID cards or passports as forms of identification on election day, as opposed to a special ID issued for voting only.

15. (U) Parliament also adopted an article related to the time period required for municipal leaders to wait before being allowed to run in parliamentary elections. The compromise on municipal councils allows heads of village municipalities to run for general elections if they resign six months ahead of balloting date, while maintaining a two-year advance resignation condition for heads of municipal council in major towns, cities and provincial capitals. This is widely seen as benefiting Walid Jumblatt ally Dory Chamoun, who is currently a mayor of a town that would meet the six-month rule.

16. (U) Several reforms were rejected; including lowering the voting age from 21 to 18, introducing an MP quota for women, allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote overseas (the new law does, however, call for overseas voting in 2013), and the

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provision that voters use government-issued, pre-printed ballots to cast their votes.

CIVIL SOCIETY REACTS

17. (U) Pre-printed ballots was a major issue for civil society reformers. Currently, voters use non-uniform ballots which are usually distributed by different parties on election day. This was a key reform which civil society worked tirelessly to have added to the new elections law to preserve voter privacy. (Parties often number and check the ballots distributed on election day.)

18. (U) Richard Chambers, Country Director for International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), said the vote concerning the measure of using pre-printed ballots was defeated by a 50-20 decision of the 70 MPs present. According to Chambers, the vote went along party lines, but not by bloc. Future Movement (pro-government, March 14 bloc), Hizballah (pro-opposition, March 8 bloc), Amal (pro-opposition, March 8 bloc) and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP, pro-government March 14) voted against the pre-printed ballot measure. Lebanese Forces (LF, pro-government March 14) and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM, pro-opposition aligned with March 8 bloc) voted in favor of the ballot reform. Chamber noted that the vote came after the Iftar meal break, and that it was clear that a deal had been brokered during the break. MP Robert Ghanem (pro-government, pro-March 14), Chairman of the Parliament's Administration of Justice Committee, had been charged with drafting the electoral law. Ghanem had spoken in favor of the proposal during the September 29 morning session, but then voted against the same measure in the Monday evening session.

19. (U) According to Chambers, the two most important reforms of lowering voting age and ballot papers were rejected by Parliament. In addition, the establishment of an Independent Elections Commission (IEC) was diluted considerably by the Parliament's decision to instead create a fairly weak supervisory body to monitor electoral campaigns spending and to regulate the media. It was also disappointing to Chambers

that only 70 MPs, out of 127, were present to vote on this issue of pre-printed ballots.

¶10. (U) Joe Hall, Country Director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Lebanon, noted that in his discussions with March 14 politicians, electoral reform was very low on their collective agenda. The only urgency expressed by politicians related to defeating a minor proposal to allow voting by members of the armed forces. Hall said MPs were lobbying each other to either vote for and against pre-printed ballots and the political blocs were split. FPM, LF and a some independent March 14 politicians were in favor of the pre-printed ballot. Future Movement, Hizballah and Amal were against the reform, a change from the views expressed in an Administration and Justice Committee meeting where all parties represented supported pre-printed ballot measure.

¶11. (U) Hall said the MEPI funded coalition of pro-electoral reform NGOs, the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER), is strategizing about what to do next. Hall added that he hoped for some reaction to the pre-printed ballot measure's defeat by the diplomatic community.

MARCH 14 REACTIONS

¶12. (C) March 14 figures Walid Jumblatt and Ghattas Khoury told DCM after the vote that they were satisfied with the outcome. Khoury, an ally of Saad Hariri, was particularly dismissive of the idea of pre-printed ballots that was

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defeated. Another March 14 figure, Antoine Haddad of Nassib Lahoud's Democratic Renewal Movement, admitted that the end results were not as "significant" as some members of civil society would have liked. He was pleased that official Lebanese forms of ID will be used instead of previously issued voter ID cards. "The Syrians printed those up in the 90s and pro-Syrian forces have stacks of blank cards that can be reprinted at any time. Getting rid of those old voter ID cards will prevent fraud."

¶13. (C) In regards to the measures to control campaign spending and media coverage, Haddad said, "It was important to put these reforms on paper, as it signals that Lebanon is moving in the right direction. However, the supervisory body that was approved does not have enough power to actually enforce these regulations in the 2009 elections, although hopefully it will gain more authority in the future. Hizballah will not play by the rules, so it is unlikely that the March 14 parties will do so either, he said.

¶14. (C) Haddad supports the decision to postpone expat voting until the 2013 elections. "This requires a tremendous amount of administrative preparation and we simply are not ready." Special Assistant mentioned civil society dismay that Saad Hariri's Future Party had joined with Hizballah and Amal to oppose pre-printed ballots and the perception that this was done to allow political deals and candidate lists to be negotiated up until the last minute. Interestingly, Haddad disagreed and replied that the electoral districts agreed upon in Doha were the primary cause. "Some districts are so huge, including Hariri's 3rd district in Beirut, that there would have been over forty candidates per page with photos when all of the parties finally submitted their lists. "People thought the ballots would be a confusing mess and that district is too important to use 'experimental' ballots."

¶15. (C) On October 2, MP Minister of State Wael Abu Faour (PSP) told PolEcon Chief that Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and Parliament Speaker (and Amal leader) Nabih Berri rejected the pre-printed ballot reform because it would reduce their capabilities in mobilizing voters. Haddad also blamed Doha districting for other failed measures, including

a quota for female candidates. "With the districts so tightly drawn, they eliminated the space for the more unseasoned female candidates to run."

¶16. (C) Asked to summarize March 14's overall reaction, Haddad said that Sunnis were satisfied, as their districts are mostly uncontested areas and the election will produce few surprises. He told us that there is greater uncertainty in the Christian voting districts and, therefore, anxiety is higher among the Christian members of March 14.
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